



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

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### INTERIOR DEPARTMENT ACQUIRES 14,000 ACRES FOR NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM THROUGH LAND TRADE WITH ALASKA NATIVE GROUPS

The Interior Department today announced a land acquisition in Alaska that gives the Federal Government 14,175 acres of important wildlife and recreation lands in exchange for temporary use by a coalition of Alaska Native corporations of approximately 4,110 acres on remote St. Matthew Island, located about 225 miles from the mainland in the Bering Sea.

The agreement was signed by Deputy Under Secretary of the Interior William Horn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Robert Jantzen and representatives of the three Alaska Native corporations--Cook Inlet Region, Inc., Calista Corporation, and Sea Lion Corporation, known collectively as the "CIRI Group."

Horn said the agreement with the CIRI Group was made possible by provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) which authorize acquisitions by exchange of lands within Conservation System Units, including wilderness areas, when such exchanges are determined to be in the public interest. He said this authority was unique to Alaska and could not be exercised in the lower 48 States.

St. Matthew Island is one of 2,500 islands comprising the 3.4 million acre Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. The island is about 35 miles long by 3.5 miles wide and along with its neighboring islands, Hall and Pinnacle, is designated wilderness. The exchange area represents about 5 percent of St. Matthew Island and less than one tenth of one percent of the Alaska Maritime Refuge. The lands received by the Federal Government are inholdings within Kenai and Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuges.

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"The addition of these biologically and recreationally important lands is a real benefit to the National Wildlife Refuge System in Alaska," Horn said. "In return for the CIRI Group's temporary use of the acreage on St. Matthew, the Government is receiving in perpetuity high value lands claimed by Alaska Natives under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), including key waterfront acreage along three of Alaska's most popular sport fishing rivers, the Kenai, Kasilof and Russian, and vital nesting habitat for several declining waterfowl species in the Kokechik Bay lowlands."

The CIRI group is expected to use the conveyed portion of St. Matthew Island as a support base for oil and gas exploration in the Navarin Basin, which is part of the Bering Sea outer continental shelf (OCS).

Horn said the agreement requires the CIRI Group to reclaim and restore the St. Matthew tract and then reconvey it to Federal ownership following termination of OCS support activities on the island. In addition, strict stipulations designed to minimize harmful impacts on the island's wildlife populations will be enforced while the area is used for energy support activities. Compliance with these stipulations will be monitored by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel stationed on the island for purposes of conducting studies and gathering data on the wildlife refuge.

The three Alaska Native corporations conveyed or relinquished to the United States the following lands and interests in lands they had selected under ANCSA:

Kokechik Bay Lands -- From the Sea Lion Corporation a perpetual nondevelopment easement on approximately 8,238 acres of tidal marshlands that lie within the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. This area is considered one of the finest waterfowl nesting habitats in the world. Ten to fifteen percent of all Pacific black brant nest here. The highest known densities of emperor geese also nest in this area, as do a significant percentage of cackling Canada geese, the smallest subspecies of Canada geese. All of these species are believed to be declining, and the cackling Canada geese are declining markedly.

Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Lands -- From Cook Inlet Region, Inc., several parcels totalling 4,824 acres, most of which is lake or stream front property. The largest of these tracts (2,570 acres) is located along the Kasilof River near Tustumena Lake. The primary values of this area are as habitat for moose and black bear, and for recreational uses such as hunting, camping, photography, hiking, nature study and fishing access. An additional 2,254 acres includes key tracts along the heavily fished Kenai, Russian and Swanson Rivers.

Nunivak Island Lands -- From Calista Corporation approximately 1,113 acres of inholdings on Nunivak Island, a unit of Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. The lands include one large tract of 640 acres and numerous smaller tracts many of which are located near or on important seabird nesting cliffs. Nunivak Island also supports one of the three musk ox herds in the United States.

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Fish and Wildlife Service Director Robert Jantzen said the exchange benefits the National Wildlife Refuge System. "These lands contribute directly to the purposes for which the Kenai and Yukon Delta refuges were established," Jantzen said. "Half the population of Alaska has ready access to Kenai, and the acquisitions there will protect inholdings from potential development and make available recreational areas that might have been closed to public use. The additions at Yukon Delta will ensure refuge protection to valuable wildlife areas that might otherwise have been subject to development or caused other management difficulties for the refuge."

Although preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required for conveyances of land to Natives or Native Corporations under ANILCA or ANCSA, the Fish and Wildlife Service prepared a lengthy ascertainment report on the environmental consequences of the proposed exchange and alternative actions. A number of other studies and consultations were also conducted, including consultations under the Endangered Species Act, a determination in compliance with ANILCA that the exchange would be in the public interest, an analysis of effects on subsistence hunting, and a determination that the proposed exchange would be consistent with Alaska's Coastal Zone Management Program, with which the State of Alaska concurred.

Currently uninhabited, St. Matthew is not an untouched habitat; the island was first discovered by a Russian expedition in 1769 and was later described by Captain James Cook, who saw it in 1778. Since the early 1800's, the island was visited by explorers, Aleut and Russian polar bear hunters, fox trappers, whalers, surveyors and scientists.

During World War II, LORAN and weather stations were maintained on St. Matthew by the U.S. military. Eight rusting Quonset huts, a number of antennas and hundreds of fuel barrels remain as evidence of this operation. A herd of exotic reindeer introduced to the island during this time as a food source for military personnel increased to 6,000 animals. Overgrazing by these animals seriously depleted the lichen flora of the island. The reindeer suffered a massive die-off in 1964 and today none remain on the island.

St. Matthew is heavily utilized by nesting seabirds such as murre, gulls, auklets, puffins and kittiwakes. Migrating shorebirds and waterfowl also use the island. The tract conveyed to the CIRI Group contains no seabird nesting habitat. Only two mammals occur naturally on the island: the Arctic fox and an endemic species of vole.

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